

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE B-15

THE WASHINGTON POST
20 May 1981

JACK ANDERSON

Death in a Guatemalan Village

The Reagan administration still plans to resume the sale of arms to the military government of Guatemala, despite warnings by our embassy there that right-wing terrorists supported by the regime were probably responsible for a recent massacre of 24 townspeople, including a young girl.

The torture and execution of the villagers occurred in the small farming community of Chuabajito on April 9, according to the U.S. Embassy's confidential cable to Washington. From 20 to 60 masked men, armed with machetes and automatic weapons and wearing civilian clothes, descended on the town in three trucks that had no license plates.

The invaders went from house to house demanding supposedly hidden firearms. They fired shots in the air and put up leftist revolutionary propaganda posters. The gang rounded up 23 men and led them blindfolded to the village schoolhouse, where they were butchered within the hour.

The embassy cable describes the scene of horror the terrorists left behind: "The bodies bore machete or bullet wounds or both, and at least some showed explicit torture. Ostensibly the intruders killed the child when she ran to embrace her father. Purportedly because of fear of reprisal, most of the bodies went unclaimed."

The bodies were buried in a mass grave. Some, according to Guatemalan reports, had been brutalized to the point of decapitation.

When reports of the massacre began to filter out of the hinterlands, the government of Maj. Gen. Fernando Romero Lucas Garcia promised a complete investigation. Within a week, the military regime issued a report blaming the atrocity on "criminal subversives" — meaning leftist guerrillas.

But political experts in the U.S. Embassy smelled a rat. Their analysis, based on knowledge of the intricate, dog-eat-dog world of right-left violence in Guatemala, suggested that the military was covering up for a right-wing death squad. The cable to Foggy Bottom, reviewed by my associate Bob Sherman, explains the experts' reasoning this way:

"The government explanation strains credulity. Although the guerrillas claim more campesino [peasant] victims than they are usually credited with, torture is not usually part of the modus operandi; nor would guerrillas be searching for arms in campesino homes, or be traveling in plateless vehicles, which could be expected to attract the attention of authorities.

"A guerrilla motive would be hard to fathom," the cable continues, "unless it would have been to pin an atrocity on the government, in which case the intruders should have been dressed in uniform . . ."

The embassy analysts concluded that the brutal attack may have been part of a pattern of government retribution against peasants in areas in which the leftists enjoy wide support. "Grim experience suggests that Chuabajito was a reprisal, with a bow to plausible denial, in the pattern of earlier incidents."

GERMAN QUALMS: West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt is due in Washington today, and most diplomatic observers believe his talks with President Reagan will be genuinely warm.

But there is one issue that can bring trouble if it is raised: arms control.

Most worrisome of all, though, in European eyes, is the space shuttle.

The Europeans note that administration hawks are bringing pressure to exploit the full military potential of the space shuttle. Intelligence analysts say that within three years the Pentagon could ferry enough weapons into space on the shuttle to give the United States an "overwhelming" strategic advantage. What they mean by this, according to a recent Defense Intelligence Agency analysis, is that we could annihilate the Soviet Union while suffering "acceptable" losses of 40 percent of our industry and 20 percent of the population, or 40 million casualties.